

Why Don't They Get It?

^{NRS} Rom 9:1 I am speaking the truth in Christ-- I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit--² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.⁶ It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,⁷ and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you."⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.⁹ For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son."

^{NRS} Rom 9:16 So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

You know, no matter how close we are to another person, no matter how similar we are in terms of our experience and our beliefs- no two people will ever see a thing entirely the same way. There is always some sliver of difference, some slight shift. Sometimes this difference is barely noticeable- you say tomato, and I say to-mah-to. But sometimes it can feel like a yawning chasm.

One of my friends in high school, Jonathan Meiburg- he was one of the most interesting and amazing people I've ever known. First off he was brilliant- he graduated early and ended up winning this MacArthur grant in college that enabled him to travel all the way around the world studying birds. But he wasn't just smart- he had a kind of old soul that you don't encounter in a lot of young people. In high school we were in a band together. We were called Whu Gnu- we even have our own Wikipedia entry now though we haven't played together in years. I remember one night I went over to his house, I

remember he always drove so slowly, so carefully, with his face close to the wheel more like a senior citizen than a high school senior. His folks were away, but we weren't up to no good. He said, "Want to swim?" And I did. And so we jumped into his pool in the middle of the hot Texas night- the water so warm around our young bodies. And we just floated there in that darkness, looking up at the stars. We just floated there for what seemed like forever. We didn't say anything, and we didn't have to. There were times back then, that I felt as close to Jonathan as I did to anyone else in the world.

Then later, when we got out- he wanted to play some music for me. He was always doing this. Jonathan has ended up a very successful musician- Melissa discovered a few months ago one of the bands he in was honored as NPR's album of the year last year and at this moment he's touring around Europe somewhere. I'm so proud of who he's become, but I do NOT miss how he would play music for me. Because it was always like a test. He would stick the CD in, and then he would just sit in a chair and stare at me, seeing how I would react to the music. And he was so sensitive. If he played something for you, it was because he loved it. And it wasn't enough then to just *like* what he was offering- you had to love it, too. And so he would sit there, like a dog who has discovered a dead bird and has dropped this prize joyously at your feet and is looking at you like, "Isn't this just the BEST?" And I will always remember the pain, the disappointment on Jonathan's sensitive, long face, when it became clear I wasn't nearly as into the song as he was, which was often. And it seems like such a small thing now, but back then- music was everything to us. It was our world. And not loving the music Jonathan loved- it was like not loving him.

You know, no matter how close we are to another person, no matter how similar we are in terms of our experience and our beliefs- no two people will ever see a thing entirely the same way. There is always some sliver of difference, some slight shift. Sometimes this difference is barely noticeable- you say tomato, and I say to-mah-to. But sometimes it can feel like a yawning chasm.

This is what Paul was feeling when he wrote this part of his incredible letter to the Romans. This sense that no matter how much you have in common with somebody- there are still times when you find yourself at the other end of the world from them.

Romans is Paul's last and greatest letter- and while it really is a letter, he says 'hi' to folks he knows and at the end he recommends to them his friend Phoebe, who was a pastor at another church and was now looking for a job at Rome, when you read through it, it doesn't sound like any letter you've probably ever sent or hopefully received. Most of Romans is this dense, theological argument that boils down to Paul's wrestling with salvation and grace and the mystery of why so many Jews weren't accepting Jesus and so many Gentiles were. It's such a grand piece of theology, one commentator calls it an "alpine peak towering over the hills and villages of the other New Testament writings". But, in spite of all the sophisticated theology Paul is doing here, every once in a while Paul the man pops up to the surface alongside Paul the theologian. And our reading for this morning- this is one of those places.

Paul writes: *I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people.*

I'd cut myself off from Christ for you if it would help. Yikes. Why is Paul so upset?

Well, he's upset because the work he set out to accomplish has completely failed. When Paul started out his ministry- he saw himself as the perfect person to communicate with his people, the Jews. But now after a lifetime of work- he's throwing in the towel and admitting he's failed- at least when it came to winning the hearts and minds of Israel.

There's a certain poignancy to this, too, because you have to remember that we're hearing Paul's last words in print- most folks date this letter to around 56, which probably means Paul wrote it just ten years before his death. Paul isn't some new kid, with his whole ministry ahead of him- he's been there, done that, and got the tunic. But here, at nearly the end of his life, in spite of everything else he's accomplished, he's admitting that the thing he set out to do, to share Christ with the people he knew the best and had the most in common with- it never really worked.

I say when he started out he saw himself as the perfect person to bring the message of Jesus to his people, and he was. Here he was, a leader among his people, educated, a Pharisee even he tells us- he was the perfect person to be a spokesperson for Christianity. I mean think about it. Who did Jesus pick for disciples? A bunch of uneducated fishermen who fought amongst themselves- Judas betrayed him, Thomas doubted him, and Peter denied him. Not exactly the A-team we're talking about here, right? Well Paul wasn't stupid- he knew what his people thought of all this. Jesus might have been ok, he might have been smarter than he let on- but his friends? Yikes, they hadn't even finished high school much less college or seminary.

So Paul sees an opportunity here- he sees a niche for himself. He could be the spokesperson that Peter and that bunch could never be. And I totally see this. When you

study Greek, classical Greek, professors get really excited about the quality of writing. And generally you start people out learning baby stuff- which is most of the New Testament. And you suffer through this until they are ready for something more challenging like Plato and Thucydides. And then, when you've graduated to really doing Greek, you're reading poetry- you're reading Aeschylus and Sophocles. Well unlike most of the New Testament, Paul actually falls more into the middle category of Plato and writers that are more challenging. From his writing it's clear that Paul studied rhetoric and wasn't just writing down his thoughts as they came, but he was giving thought to his style and his craft.

But in spite of all this training, in spite of his incredible credentials, in spite of everything- his mission as he set out on ends as an utter failure. The Book of Acts gives us the best picture of Paul's ministry amongst his people. Time and time again, Paul would basically go into a town with a couple of his friends, hit the synagogue, stay after and give a talk- and most of the time he would either be run out on a rail, put into jail, or just narrowly escape. Time and time again- the people he cared about the most, the people he most wanted to understand him, the people he thought had the best ability to understand him- he could never make them see Jesus the same way he did.

I can imagine him like Jonathan Meiburg. There Paul is telling his friends about his experience with Christ, telling them about his eyes being opened- and then staring at them as their faces gave away the fact they just weren't really getting what he was talking about. There are times when the people we most care about, the people we share the most in common with- even they aren't able to fully see things exactly the way we do.

And when this happens, I don't know if there's anything more painful in the world. I was just talking with a person the other day who had a class with a man I knew back in New Jersey, Dave Prince. I actually did year long internship at his church, Ewing Presbyterian Church. Ewing was an incredible place- the kind of place where an unusually wide variety of people made their way, gay and lesbian families were named and welcomed. And recovering alcoholics and addicts who never expected to be in church in their lives sat side by side life long Presbyterians in suits and ties in worship. I once heard someone ask Dave how the church became like that. This is what he said. His daughter, Jenny, was afflicted with an alcohol problem that cut her life tragically short. As a young girl, 16, 17, 18 she would run away at night, often on Saturday, and Dave would have to go out looking for her- sometimes he wouldn't make it back in time for Sunday. And he said for years just a two or three people knew- and they always made something up when Dave had to be gone unexpectedly. Finally, one time Dave was so tired of it all, then when she left and he knew he wasn't going to be back in time and they asked him what to do, Dave said, "Tell them the truth. Tell them the truth." And from that moment on Dave and Nancy, his wife, let the church into this part of their lives- into this part of their lives where they felt the pain of knowing that whatever it was Jenny most needed- neither they nor anyone else they called in for help, none of them were able to give it to her. The people closest to her, the people with the most in common with her- even they weren't able to bridge whatever it was that divided them. Dave and Nancy knew exactly what Paul meant when he said he would cut himself off from Christ if it would mean his family was able to know and feel and experience just a little of his grace.

And it's the same for Paul- he wasn't able to reach the people he cared about the most. The Jews for the most part stayed Jewish. And the people he really did great with were the last people on earth he was interested in- at least at first. Proving yet again God has this amazing sense of humor, Paul is most successful with the Gentiles- with people good Jews wouldn't even sit at table with.

And so he tries to understand it- he tries to get his head around it. And it's so frustrating to him. I mean here are the Jews, he writes- who know the Hebrew Bible, they know all about Abraham, and the prophets- they know about a coming Messiah. They know about all this stuff- but they aren't having any of this Jesus business. And the Greeks, these guys raised on Zeus and Athena, the Odyssey and the Iliad- they don't even know how to spell Messiah, but they are enraptured with Paul's teachings. None of it makes sense, but this is just how it is.

Now the most interesting part of this text to me is how Paul responds to all this. What I would expect him to do (well, what I would do anyway) is when he figures out his isn't getting through and it probably is never going to get through- I would expect him to get mad. Like, OK, you aren't going to care about the things I care about? Well fine- forget you! I never really liked you anyway. Or, if didn't turn the anger at them, he could always internalize it. We do that, too, sometimes. Like, how *could* they listen to me, really? What was I thinking? All this Jesus stuff- really, it is pretty crazy sounding. What was I doing?

But between getting mad at his people, or getting mad at himself- he does something completely different. He says- maybe none of us are to blame here. Maybe,

as strange as it sounds, maybe, he says, this is just how God wants things to be. Maybe instead of everyone all thinking alike and believing the same things- maybe God wants there be Christians *and* Jews.

This why Paul says, after his heartbreak that it's not as if God has failed. And he talks about there always differences even within Israel- all the way back to Jacob and Esau and Isaac and Ishmael. And he even brings up Pharaoh, not saying Pharaoh was horrible and terrible, but that even he, even Pharaoh was part of God's plan for the world. The most important line is here is when Paul says, "So it doesn't depend on human will or exertion", i.e. how hard *he* worked, "but it depends on God and God's mercy." See, Paul winds up realizing that his job never really was to change these people he loved so dearly, to convert them or persuade them- change like that is always in God's hands not ours. His job was simply to do what he did- to tell them what he believed, where he found life, and then to move on when it was time.

And the good news is yeah, things don't always work out exactly the way we think, and sometimes this is disappointing- but sometimes it's glorious. I mean who could have predicted that Paul, this conservative, fundamentalist Jew would end up making friends with what seemed like half of pagan Greece?

Hey, what would it be like in your life if, when you realized that someone you care about just doesn't agree with you on a fundamental, a basic level, or see the world the way you do- what if instead of being mad at them, or feeling like a failure, or even trying to change them- what if you assumed this was actually God's doing and said, "Hey maybe it's supposed to be like this- I wonder what I can learn?" What would the world

look like if people acted like Paul here? What would Christians who continue to kill each other in Northern Ireland said, “You know, I don’t know why we’re Protestant and you’re Roman Catholic- but maybe it’s not because we’re all right and you’re a bunch of morons. Maybe this is God’s doing. Maybe we’re supposed to be like this?” Or, and I realize this is an absolute stretch- but what if, as November approaches as we start putting our bumper stickers on our cars and we start sending nasty emails back and forth about how Obama and/or McCain abuse small woodland creatures- what if we said “I don’t know why there are Republicans and Democrats, I don’t know why it has to be like this- but maybe this is God’s doing? Maybe we’re supposed to be like this? Maybe, dare I say it, we need each other?”

Why don’t they get it? That’s the title of the sermon. That’s the question we mutter to ourselves when we’re frustrated when people aren’t listening to us. But you know what? It’s a bad question. They say there are no bad questions. But Paul would say this is a bad question. A better one when we’re confused: why don’t I get it? This week when someone you care about is frustrating you- ask yourself this Romanesque question. Instead of blaming everyone else for what’s going on- say, what am I missing here? What is God doing that I’m just not seeing? Because if God can work through Pharaoh- God might even be able to work through us. **Amen.**